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ABSTRACT

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of U.S. public schools requires teachers to be more sensitive to how symbols and figures of speech are used to maintain an effective cross-cultural communication. The purpose of this paper is to address and discuss the role of sociocultural factors that shape the insights and perspectives of diverse students in the process of interacting with others. Diverse students come to the classroom with a limited view of the use of English figures of speech and language symbols; they also employ culturally-bound symbols and figures of speech that cause miscommunication in the target language. Teachers need to foster a classroom environment where these symbolic differences are taken into consideration. They also need to create conditions that promote effective use of symbols and figures of speech. These conditions involve valuing linguistic and cultural diversity, contextualizing learning tasks and activities, and utilizing language functions to maintain meaningful interaction. Moreover, classroom pedagogy should center around empowering the students to communicate creatively in a more culturally sensitive environment. Finally, teachers should encourage students to use figures of speech to communicate their unique meanings to others in the learning environment in order to promote more cross-cultural understanding in diverse classrooms. (Contains 25 references.) (Author)

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FIGURES OF SPEECH, SYMBOLISM AND THE COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS IN THE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the U.S. public schools requires teachers to be more sensitive to how symbols and figures of speech are used to maintain an effective cross-cultural communication. Since symbolism, which is bound by many cultural connotations and definitions, is an important aspect of language use, teachers must be aware of the barriers that may affect the communicative process. The purpose of this study is to address and discuss the role of sociocultural factors that shape the insights and perspectives of diverse students in the process of interacting with others. Diverse students come to the classroom with a limited view of the use of English figures of speech and language symbols; they also employ their culturally-bound symbols and figures of speech which cause miscommunication in the target language. Teachers need to foster a classroom environment where these symbolic differences are taken into consideration. They also need to create conditions that promote effective use of symbols and figures of speech. These conditions involve valuing linguistic and cultural diversity, contextualizing learning tasks and activities, and utilizing language functions to effectively maintain a meaningful interaction. Moreover, the classroom pedagogy should center around empowering the student to communicate creatively in a more culturally sensitive environment. Finally, teachers should encourage students to use figures of speech to communicate their unique meanings to others in the learning environment in order to promote more cross-cultural understanding in the diverse classrooms.

FIGURES OF SPEECH, SYMBOLISM AND THE COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS IN THE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Introduction

In today's classroom, students from linguistically diverse backgrounds bring various unique figures of language to the culture of the classroom. At the same time, they are exposed in many ways to novel figures of speech in the environment in which learning a second takes place. These may result in miscommunication and misunderstandings in the learning/teaching process. Teachers and students should actively participate in the mediation process to overcome communication barriers when using figures of language. This paper will focus on these issues and provide pedagogical implications for teachers in the multicultural classroom.

Using the cognitive constructivist approach to education, this paper addresses and discusses the role of sociocultural factors that shape the insights and perspectives of diverse students in the process of interacting with others.

Diverse students who come to the classroom with a limited view of the use of English figures of speech and language symbols, employ their culturally-bound symbols and figures of speech which cause miscommunication in the target language. Since communication requires both linguistic (and sociolinguistic) knowledge for interaction along with the cultural rules and knowledge which constitute the context of the process of meaningful communicative interaction (Shen, 1993), teachers need to foster a classroom environment where these symbolic differences are taken into account. They also need to create conditions that promote effective use of symbols and figures of speech (Shen, 1993). These conditions involve valuing linguistic and cultural diversity, contextualizing learning tasks and activities, and utilizing language functions to effectively maintain a meaningful interaction. Moreover, the classroom pedagogy should center around empowering the student to communicate creatively in a more culturally sensitive environment. Finally, teachers should encourage students to use figures of speech to

communicate their unique meanings to others in the learning environment in order to promote more cross-cultural understanding in the diverse classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Language is a tool of communication that is evolving, dynamic, and creative. As a social phenomenon, language is the medium to make the interaction process alive and meaningful. Any language is replete with devices that meet the communicative needs of its users. Various linguistic levels such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics are intricately linked, and governed by certain universal parameters. These are changing tools that allow individuals in the linguistic community to harness these linguistic devices to add richness to the socialization process.

An integral part of language mechanisms involves communication through using figures of speech and symbolism. These are used in speech and writing for many reasons, in many ways, and different contexts. Figures of speech are used in every language to defy description and literal denotations of an utterance or sentence. Figures of speech are artistic techniques used by individuals and groups in the linguistic community to fulfill diverse communicative needs and functions. They add richness to the messages communicated and appeal to the receivers of these messages in an attempt to make meanings more vivid and concrete. At the same time, they appeal to the audience's more abstract feelings and sensory faculties.

The use of symbolism is a device to improve language use. Whether in writing or speech, figures of language are directly and indirectly used. For example, literary men such as poets deliberately use metaphors, similes, and the like to pinpoint the universal aesthetic elements of linguistic devices that underlie the deep structure of language and promote a more comprehensive view of the world around them. Once interpreted, these figures enrich our understanding of the meanings communicated, and make us think beyond the literal denotation. They also engage us creatively in constructing meanings

through a process of interpretation using relevant associations that are universal and infinite.

According to the cognitive constructivist approach to education, children come to school with some constructed knowledge about many things. Children develop through their activities. Their early development relates to actions, objects, and events they have experienced through touching, hearing, seeing, tasting, and smelling (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). In other words, acquiring knowledge is a construction process in that the students build their understanding from their sensory input (Piaget, 1973).

This however can be an area of concern. According to Goldman and Trueba (1987), education is the understanding that language and culture, and the values that accompany them, are constructed in both the home and school environment. If a teacher doesn't address this issue, miscommunication will probably take place. The miscommunication occurs when all students are expected to understand English and the pictures that the words paint in the context of the figures of language along with what they stand for. Furthermore, "learning is not knowledge written on, or transformed to, a person's mind as if the mind were a blank slate waiting to be written on or empty gallery waiting to be filled" (Cobern, 1991, p. 6).

According to Dewey (1916), "education is not an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process" (p. 46). Thus, the social constructivists believe that learning takes place as a result of interactions between the teacher and student. Accordingly, the constructivist teacher "works at the interface of curriculum and students to bring them together in a way that is meaningful for the learner" (Cobern, 1991, p. 6). In addition, learning is maximized when students are engaged in collaborative learning activities. Through these interactions the students build on their own messages and actions as well as those of others within and across the everyday events of daily life (Gumperz, 1981).

However, social constructivist views differ from the cognitive constructivists in

several ways. These differences center on the emphasis placed on the social context of learning. Whereas the cognitive constructivist views of learning suggest that the learner constructs knowledge- -with or without the guidance of an adult, social constructivist describe how the social context influences this construction. According to the social constructivist framework, learning and thinking are, "situated in physical and social contexts rather than occurring solely in an individual's mind" (Greeno, 1989, p. 135).

These are very important issues when conducting a class for non-native speakers. Words make up figures of speech and the unequivocal understanding of those words requires sound comprehension for adequate interpretations of the idea. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain that language is characterized by its use of speech figures as language users construct and conceptualize the world using these representations.

Given the potential for confusion in using certain words or phrases, the social interaction process needs to take place in the classroom culture with the students over time. To the constructivist, the classroom is not just a room in a place called school. Instead, it is a classroom that evolves over time as the students and the teacher interact with each other in particular ways to achieve specific educational goals. Thus, the teacher and students in each classroom work together to build common understanding of words, meanings, and expectations. Figures of speech and language symbols then can become forceful driving powers, inculcating the way we think of ourselves and others, events and even nations.

To illustrate, Lakoff (1987) provided an example of a tribe using a single word to signify "women, fire, and dangerous things". The imagery evoked by the metaphor used in everyday language of these people provides some understanding of gender relations in the tribe. When some groups use a word for a foreigner that also can be used for devil, conflict can be swift and perhaps unintended.

Individuals can learn without the aid of others but social interaction has many benefits. First, allowing students to interact in a given social circle, they become engaged in multiple roles and perform various cognitive tasks (A. Brown & Reeve, 1987). Next,

students may be able to elicit and confront misconceptions and ineffective strategies that an individual teacher is unable to accomplish in a whole class setting. Moreover, by allowing the students to interact, a synergistic effect takes place which enhances cognition and problem solving skills which avail participants individually and collectively (J. Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

By focusing on the context associated with speech figures, meaningful learning can occur. Through the mediation process (Vygotsky, 1978), authentic activities link everything in the classroom to contextualized task. As learners acquire more experience, they will be better prepared to define problems and produce problem-solving strategies that will enhance their knowledge and language acquisition.

Figures of Language and the Communicative Process:

The use of figures of speech helps us penetrate beneath the surface structure of an utterance or a sentence in that they have symbolic meanings that add richness and universality to the figurative expressions. For all higher level language functions, the human mind must be innately programmed, and the job of the teacher is to activate, not create, the program (Gill, 1992, p. 52). According to Gumperz (1982), to understand the language and metaphor embedded in it requires an understanding of the words and ways in which they are used to communicate meaning among the members of a group. Like words, in their pragmatic function, figures of speech tend to "free people from the local setting and allow communication across time and space" (Collins & Green, 1990, p. 71).

However, when figures of speech are used, the rules of language are violated. In fact, this is part of the way language is put into use. Linguists identify several kinds of rule violations. According to Fromkin and Rodman (1993) anomalous, metaphorical, and idiomatic usage of language are examples of these violations. For example, the sentence *That bachelor is pregnant* is an anomalous and "nonsense" type of statement given the violation of semantic rules. Likewise, Chomsky's classic example *Colorless green ideas*

sleep furiously has something semantically wrong although it is a syntactically well-formed sentence. Nonetheless, both sentences defy the surface interpretation and make receivers of the message think about the symbolic meanings that underlie these statements. Yet some metaphors are not necessarily anomalous when taken literally.

Language abounds in these violations of semantic and syntactic rules for communicative purposes. Despite these violations, meanings are understood by members of the linguistic community. The value of these violations lies in the fact that they create the imagery and symbolic meanings desired. Yet, to interpret the underlying meaning embedded in figures of speech, communicators need to understand both the surface and deep structures of the expression, as they relate to facts about the world. Nonetheless, what makes the communicative process meaningful using figures of speech, lies in both language creativity and participants' linguistic intelligence that help interpret semantic properties of words, and combine these words in a meaningful manner.

Closely relevant to our focus is the importance of context in understanding the underlying cultural implications of figures of language. This is an important concept because language is not used in vacuum; it is used in a sociocultural context that determines meaningful and mutual understanding among participants in the communicative situation. In fact, this is imperative to the understanding of figures of speech in various settings. Thus, both students and teachers in the interactional process are faced with a set of questions whose answers may help in constructing meanings in a given interactive event.

Having this in mind, Cobern (1991) postulates a series of questions in the context of teaching science which involves some universal elements. These questions intricately relate and apply to the learning and teaching of figures of speech. What students and teachers do believe about the world around them especially the physical world, how they understand their place in the world namely in relationships to others, and what impact the cultural milieu has on the belief systems and social norms as they relate to behavior, are all important questions in using language figures.

Fundamentally, it is vital to understand the culturally-based belief embedded in the speech figures used by diverse participants in the class. The extent to which these figures of speech such as metaphors, similes and the like, find a place in the cognitive and scociocultural milieu of students and teachers alike, is extremely important to the communicative process.

Consequently, the need for this understanding becomes imperative considering the increasingly growing diversity in the U.S. educational institutions along with the attitudinal and motivational forces associated with them.

Figures of Speech in Linguistically Diverse Settings

Students in linguistically diverse classrooms bring a large repertoire of knowledge about language as a human phenomenon. Although they may be limited in one language at the productive proficiency levels, linguistically diverse students have an unlimited metalinguistic awareness and mediation. For example, second language learners who come to school already mastering a native language are more likely to enhance their linguistic intelligence than monolingual learners (Garcia, 1983; Garcia, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Hakuta, 1986; Hakuta, 1995). On the other hand, while a monolingual learner is enhancing his linguistic intelligence in one language, a linguistically diverse learner is enhancing his in more than one representative of human language.

The classroom for a non-native speaker is an artificial environment to learn a second language. How the communicative process is conducted is also different. In a traditional classroom, the focus of language is on communication. How a teacher explains ideas contributes to the understanding of the second language learner.

In process, learning a second language becomes more demanding when learners try to unlock embedded meanings of figures of speech. This difficulty relates to the previously learned linguistic and interactional patterns pertaining to both cultures and languages at issue, both of which affect the learning process. Since the role of multicultural figures of

speech can not be undermined in the classroom, teachers should help students construct knowledge that is relevant to the students' interests and needs. Using bilingual multicultural figures will make it easier for second language learners to get enculturated in schools.

Also, the linguistic cues in culturally diverse classrooms are significant to both learning and instruction. Generally, idioms, figures of speech, words, sentences and the like have several cultural connotations to the learner of second language. Since figures of speech are different and difficult avenues of language learning partly because of the sociocultural meanings communicated and also because the ideas are not straightforward, special considerations should be kept in mind when teaching these aspects of language use in a multicultural setting.

Teacher's awareness of the cross-linguistic problems encountered by second language learners in diverse classrooms, becomes the major step in helping students interact in the new language (Odlen, 1993). The issue here involves culturally equitable pedagogical practices in language instruction, because the less compatible instructional methods are, the more sociocultural and linguistic factors relevant to the learner are undermined. These challenges facing language teachers intensify in culturally diverse settings. Before we present pedagogical implications, it is helpful to consider the philosophical underpinnings that underlie the teaching of speech figures in diverse settings.

The following assumptions underlie the discussion of language instruction in the culturally diverse environments

1. Students come to the class with informal information about the world around them;
2. Students have their own preferred ways of interacting with new linguistic knowledge;
3. Classroom settings hardly represent students' prior linguistic and cultural experiences;
4. Students tend to creatively use and apply what they already know to new learning experiences;

5. Knowledge in the native language is significant in learning and teaching the new language and its avenues;
6. The transfer of first language behavior may hinder or enhance the communication; process in second language settings;
7. Transfer of first language speech figures may result in confusion and miscommunication in diverse settings.

These assumption should be the foundation for any instructional techniques and other educational practices in dealing with students from diverse backgrounds. Also teachers should not have prior assumptions that are biased against the cultures represented in language classrooms.

Pedagogical Implications

Effective communication is central in the learning process. The teacher is no longer a dictator of knowledge to be rotely memorized by students. Rather, learning involves complex psycho-social processes as participants interact in a given context (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the role of the teacher in the learning/teaching process is similar to the role of the parent at home as an "enabling other" in the learning process. This is especially true in multicultural settings where the basic premise of education is multiplying learning opportunities for all learners. In these settings, students and teachers work together to negotiate the meanings as they engage in a meaningful discourse. Teachers can help students individually and make students work in small and large groups so as they can learn cooperatively.

As far as figures of speech are concerned, one may find Vygotsky's framework appealing. Learning in the Vygotskiian sense is a mediated activity in which children interact meaningfully with the world around them; this includes cultural patterns embedded in language and its symbols. That is to say, learning is based on the ingredients of people engaging in communication for the purpose of developing mutual meanings and

understandings. Thus, the unique ways language figures are used to communicate concepts and meanings must make the interaction process comprehensible and less ambiguous.

There are several areas where teachers can facilitate the learning of figures of speech in culturally diverse classrooms. Although the following recommendations are not conclusive, they are furnished as guiding principles that help teachers in diverse settings:

1. Teachers must relate in their language instruction to the out-of-school life of their students;
2. The infusion of multicultrualism in language classrooms can help teachers relate the target language to their students' out-of-school lives;
3. Teachers must "contextualize" what they teach;
4. Teachers need to be concerned about the affective factors in the classroom;
5. Teachers need to provide opportunities for developing all language skills.

When languages meet in a classroom, teachers are faced with the challenging task of making students substantiate these meanings in their preferred ways. If the language used does not make sense to the learner, the acquisition does not take place. Language is the major tool that communicates social meanings and concepts to the learners.

Conclusion

Given the difficult task of learning a second language, teaching methods should involve vicarious interactional activities. These activities could be made more meaningful through the use of icons, visual aids, and figures of language. It has been assumed that if a picture is worth a thousand words, a speech figure is worth a thousand pictures. While a picture provides only a static image, a speech figure provides a conceptual framework for interaction and mediation.

Figures of language evoke images beyond the literal meanings of the linguistic utterance to embrace other thought patterns. Since these figures are pervasive in our

ordinary language and conceptual systems, the learning/teaching situation can be enriched far beyond the particular, the literal, and the moment-to-moment details of every experience. This is indeed a rich resource of communication and interaction in diverse settings. Finally, figures of speech at best can only convey a part of the complexity of the communicative process pertaining to teaching/learning in multicultural settings.

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